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SUBJECT: IS CHINA'S RIGHTS PROTECTION MOVEMENT REACHING THE
LIMITS OF OFFICIAL TOLERATION?

Classified By: Deputy Political Counselor Robert
Griffiths for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: The rights protection movement in China has created a nationwide network in recent months, but insists on remaining a "virtual" network rather than a formal organization for fear of inviting a crackdown. The network centers on rights lawyers in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Sichuan, but supporters number in the hundreds, including journalists, intellectuals and activists. The movement draws support from some house churches and overseas Christian and non-religious groups, including those in the United States. Its most prominent public activities include the recent rotating hunger strike, along with lawsuits, rights awareness campaigns and efforts to impeach local officials, most publicly in Guangdong's Taishi village. Such actions have had marginal success and have largely been tolerated, although recent detentions and Party guidance to strike back at the network suggest that some in the movement may be pushing that tolerance past its limits. End Summary.

Weiwan Movement Increasingly Prominent, Networked

12. (C) China's rights protection movement ("weiwan yundong") has reached a new degree of networking cohesiveness in recent months, according to several of the network's members. Primarily by using the Internet, lawyers and legal activists in Beijing, Guangzhou, Shanghai and Sichuan have formed a mutual support network. They originally agreed to come to the defense of any of the network's members who faced police harassment, providing free legal defense and encouraging media reaction to protect those who might be jailed. More recently, at the instigation of Beijing attorney Gao Zhisheng, many members of the network participated in a rotating hunger strike that was organized and publicized on the Internet, China Academy of Social Sciences scholar Fan Yafeng (protect) told poloff recently.

Hundreds of Members; No Formal Organization

13. (C) The network is loosely organized, but includes private attorneys at several law firms, journalists, academics and members of China's independent PEN Center for Freedom to Write, most of whom are males under the age of 50 and many of whom have served short jail terms. A handful of low-level central government officials and provincial People's Congress deputies have also joined or shown support for the group. This support offers the movement "a certain level of

influence," according to Hubei activist Yao Lifa (protect). The group has intentionally not established a formal organization for fear of bringing on a negative government response or crackdown, said the PEN Center's Liu Xiaobo (protect). Most communications take place over the Internet; when members meet, they do so in small groups over meals or for discussion "salons."

14. (C) Most of the 14 attorneys featured as China's most notable civil rights lawyers of 2005 in Asia Newsweek (www.yzzk.com 12-25-2005) are members of the network, some of whom work for large, well-funded Chinese law firms. Many met as a result of their 2005 legal defense of Beijing house church pastor Cai Zhuohua, who is serving a three-year sentence for distributing Bibles without a publishing license. Of the 14 attorneys featured, Shanghai's Zheng Enchong and Shandong legal adviser Chen Guangcheng are in jail. Shanghai's Guo Guoting fled China for Canada in 2005 after his law license was cancelled, while Beijing's Gao Zhisheng's law license remains under a one-year suspension.

Why Has The Group Not Yet Faced A Crackdown?

15. (C) Despite these detentions, many in the group have been able to operate relatively unhindered. Some, such as Beijing's Li Heping, believe the government has determined not to detain such attorneys for fear of incurring a backlash or making martyrs of them. Others, including Li Baiguang (protect), told poloff that Vice Premier Zeng Qinghong has given instructions not to detain them. According to this

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line of thinking, Zeng wants to encourage some expression of social dissatisfaction as a way of demonstrating that Hu Jintao is governing poorly, they said. Gao Zhisheng (protect) believes that his prominence in the international community has allowed him to continue his public activities, such as open letters criticizing the government's abuse of religious activists, petitioners and the Falun Gong.

16. (C) Yet others believe that some of the group's members, in particular Gao and his aide Guo Feixiong, are becoming too bold and threaten to precipitate a crackdown. PEN Center's Yu Jie (protect) told poloff that he and other members of the Center refused to take part in the rotating hunger strike because they felt it was too confrontational and likely to lead to imprisonment of organizers. Yu said he persuaded dozens of activists not to join the strike because of this concern. Multiple sources have separately told us that Party study sessions now include guidance to "strike down" the movement, suggesting that official tolerance for the network and its actions may have reached its limit.

Successful Actions Include Defense of Rural Rights

17. (C) In the past, impeachment efforts in rural communities have demonstrated the movement's strength, even if the efforts spearheaded by the group's members have often failed. Beijing attorney Li Baiguang (protect) was a key activist supporting efforts to recall elected officials in Hebei Province's Tangshan and Qinhuangdao cities after residents were displaced without compensation by newly built reservoirs. While these recall efforts themselves failed, villagers saw that citizens in those areas received compensation, free education for their children and support to build new houses. In Fujian Province, recall efforts that

Li Baiguang spearheaded in 2004 along with detained New York Times employee Zhao Yan also failed. But again, the party secretaries of Linde and Fuzhou cities who were the targets of those campaigns were transferred to other assignments while a third, former Fo'an city party secretary, was jailed on charges of abuse of position, Li said.

18. (C) Recent efforts to recall the elected village chief of Guangdong's Taishi village have met with less success. Those efforts, organized by activist Guo Feixiong (protect), drew attention when local officials responded by hiring thugs to beat not only the Chinese organizers but also foreign journalists who attempted to cover the recall effort. Most recently, the losing candidate Feng Qiusheng has filed suit against the election committee. Feng will be represented by a number of attorneys from the rights network. The attorneys told poloff that they know they cannot get a fair court hearing, but plan to use the Internet as a public platform to write and criticize the legality of any decision, in what they are describing as a "virtual" Constitutional Court.

Support from House Churches, Overseas Organizations

19. (C) In 2006, many Beijing members of the movement have begun to gather in churches, most notable among them Beijing's Ark Covenant House Church. In the wake of the Cai Zhuohua lawsuit, attorney Gao Zhisheng became a Christian and decided to join the house church. Since that time, authorities have increased scrutiny of the church, most recently detaining American legal permanent resident filmmaker Wu Hao after he interviewed Gao as part of a documentary film about the church. In addition to the Ark Church, other churches support the network financially, a fact that may not be broadly known by the church membership, Hubei activist Yao said.

110. (C) The group has also drawn support from overseas organizations, including the Midland, Texas-based China Aid Association (CAA) (protect). At the end of this month, eight attorneys who are leaders of the organization will travel to the United States, sponsored by CAA, in an effort to raise funds and increase their networking capability. Other attorney members will travel separately to a conference on criminal defense law at New York University.

Comment: Network Reaching Its Limit?

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111. (C) Comment: Thanks to the Internet, cellphone text messaging and increasingly easy internal travel, the weiquan movement is already far more tightly networked across different cities than the 1998 China Democracy Party ever was. CDP co-founders Xu Wenli in Beijing and Wang Youcai in Hangzhou had never met in person, while lawyers in the weiquan movement meet frequently and can be in daily communication. But given the increasingly high-tech nature of Chinese police work, we believe these activists over-estimate the degree of protection they enjoy by keeping their organization a "virtual" one. Some officials may retain a degree of sympathy and tolerance for the movement's aims of helping ordinary citizens enforce their rights, but they are not likely to tolerate continued public actions, such as the rotating hunger strike.

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